



ERIC S. NELSON

Naturalism and Anti-Naturalism in Nietzsche

ABSTRACT: Nietzsche has been associated with naturalism due to his arguments that morality, religion, metaphysics, and consciousness are products of natural biological organisms and ultimately natural phenomena. The subject and its mental life are only comprehensible in relation to natural desires, drives, impulses, and instincts. I argue that such typical naturalizing tendencies do not exhaust Nietzsche's project, since they occur in the context of his critique of "nature" and metaphysical, speculative, and scientific naturalisms. Nietzsche challenges otherworldly projections of this-worldly beings, as his naturalistic interpreters claim, but further the idolization of immanent worldly natural phenomena, including science itself. "Nature" is an idealization of natural organisms and environments in which its construction, projection, and interpretation is forgotten. Nietzsche strategically uses naturalistic scientific strategies of explanation and demystification, while demystifying science, positivism, and naturalism for the sake of life. These do not provide either certainties or foundations for knowledge or life. Naturalism would be anti-natural if it denies of multiplicity and conflict of the forces of life, bracketing the natural and historical conditions of existence, and the interpretive and perspectival character of life and knowledge. The nexus of nature and history in Nietzsche is better clarified through his portrayal of the feeling of life and its intensification, attenuation, and transformation in relation to the forces and conditions of life, which encompass processes of socialization and interpretive and artistic individuation in the context of a life.

KEY WORDS: Nietzsche • naturalism • anti-naturalism • philosophy of life

1. Introduction: Between Naturalism and Constructivism¹

Two prevalent – and, as I hope to show, insufficient and one-dimensional – readings of Friedrich Nietzsche's mature philosophical thought is that it is either primarily naturalistic or radically constructivist². On the one hand,

¹ References are to the pages of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* in 15 Bänden, ed. G. Colli und M. Montinari [KSA], Berlin / München / New York 1980. I use the following translations: Za = Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Oxford 2005; TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, Indianapolis 1997; GM = *Genealogy of Morality*, Indianapolis, 1998; GS = *The Gay Science*; BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, Oxford 1998; UM = *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge 1983.

² For instance, respectively, B. Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London 2002), 6, and T. Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (Albany 2001),

naturalistic readers of Nietzsche emphasize how he explicated and evaluated human phenomena through recourse to the drives, forces, and powers of life and nature and utilized ideas, metaphors, and strategies from the biological and physiological sciences of his day. Nietzsche advocated the value of the modern sciences, albeit critically, conditionally, and while calling for the further radicalization of their experimental character. His ongoing concern with questions of natural sciences, biological life, and efficient causality – which he skeptically interrogated while maintaining the conditional and interdependent character of agents and systems – appears to be at odds with interpretations that would bracket, suspend, or disregard them³.

On the other hand, constructivists argue for the primacy of the constitution of meaning. Constructivist interpreters of Nietzsche's writings focus on Nietzsche's style and the contingent creation of conditional and relative meanings. Nietzsche's articulation of the fecundity, singularity, and multiplicity of lived-experiences is interpreted through how he unveiled the perspectival, interpretive, and constructed character of nature, life, and scientific inquiry. It is, after all, only through active interpretive forces that seeing becomes the seeing of something⁴. Nietzsche's elucidation and reliance on strategies of art and interpretation contrast with the more reductive tactics typical of naturalism and positivism that he critically diagnosed for their latent metaphysical impulses and symptoms⁵.

Discourses and practices of the true, the good, the sacred, and the beautiful are not simply untrue or ruled out as illegitimate by Nietzsche, as they are for such scientifically-oriented philosophies. Nietzsche instead exposed and evaluated discourses and practices as social-historical sedimentations of transitory feelings, value-judgments, and not always obvious exercises of power⁶. Despite Nietzsche's reliance on notions of nature, life, and causality in critiquing how these very notions are used and appropriated, and even though he did not idealistically abandon the empiricity (*Empirie*), materiality, and worldly resistance that confront and resist individuals and social-formations, Nietzsche is taken to be a thorough-going anti-naturalist

189. On the tensions between naturalistic and constructivist approaches to Nietzsche, see: T. Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* (Princeton 2007), pp.102–103.

³ Nietzsche explicitly rejected the possibility of such suspensions and neutralizations of judgment and valuing in, for instance, Nietzsche, KSA 3: 518, 535; GS, 219, 236.

⁴ Nietzsche, GM, III.12.

⁵ On the “metaphysical faith” characteristic of the ideology of modern science, see Nietzsche, KSA 3: 577; GS, 344 and KSA 5: 398–401 and GM, III.24.

⁶ On power and suffering in Nietzsche, see E. S. Nelson, *Priestly Power and Damaged Life in Nietzsche and Adorno*, [in:] *Nietzsche: Philosoph der Kultur(en)? / Philosopher of Culture?*, ed. A.U. Sommer, Berlin 2008, pp. 349–356.

insofar as the world becomes a play of the will or the subject, or a relative projection of society, power, and language.

Both of these readings obviously draw on sources expressed within Nietzsche's works. Taken together, they indicate an impasse or incoherence in reading Nietzsche as a philosopher. An alternative to these two significant yet ultimately monolithic and essentialist approaches, and their permutations that reduce the nexus of self and world to mere natural, subjective, and/or social processes, is to interpret both strategies exhibited in Nietzsche's works more seriously. Each is insufficient to a thinking that critiques ideologies of science, nature, and life, while retaining their resistance and critical transformative impulses against traditional metaphysics and abstract speculative thought.

To introduce a preliminary example, Nietzsche neither portrays the drives and instincts as either socially unalterable biological facts of a fixed or underlying nature or essence nor can they be exclusive determinations or constructions of history, language, and society. While biological drives are transformed via interpretive processes of individuation and socialization, particularly radically in morality and religion, they in turn impact, influence, and potentially resist these processes. Values are symptoms of the body in Nietzsche's physiological argumentation; yet this is not a relation of essence and contingent accident, the value expresses and reconfigures bodily forces and their nexus and hence can produce its own ill effects⁷. Prefiguring Plessner's bio-hermeneutics in this respect, Nietzsche shows how the body is already interpretive of itself and its environment. The body is not prior to or outside of the mediation of interpretation⁸.

As life is an impure and monstrous mixture of conflicting forces and interpretations, which constitute not bare life but "a life", Nietzsche unfolds in his middle-works a project of "natural history" (*Naturgeschichte*), which later becomes genealogy, in the context of an interpretive hermeneutics of nature that diverges from both the constructivist and naturalistic approaches that reflect dominant yet problematic tendencies in twentieth century and contemporary philosophy⁹.

⁷ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 348–349; GS, 33.

⁸ Although its interpretive character should not lead to neglecting the body's materiality, the body as a metaphor of interpretation has been articulated by E. Blondel, *Nietzsche, the Body and Culture: Philosophy as a Philological Genealogy*, Stanford 1991, p. 219.

⁹ On interpreting *Naturgeschichte* as critical history or genealogy see, for instance, Nietzsche, KSA 3: 100.

2. Nietzsche and the Naturalistic Overcoming of Naturalism

In Nietzsche's middle period, the question of nature is tied to the issue of "the perspectival optics of life" (*die Perspektiven-Optik des Lebens*) and perspectival assessments and probabilities (*perspektivischer Schätzungen und Scheinbarkeiten*) without which there would be no life (*es bestünde gar kein Leben*), as humans identify what is nature with their own power and projection and declare this to be natural¹⁰. Nevertheless, Nietzsche is not a thinker who simply asserts the self-assertion of the human, the anthropocentrism that believes only human truths. Instead, he can – as he does in section 333 of *Dawn* – use the images of nature and animals critically to place all too human and limited points of view into question and reveal different perspectives and horizons in order to throw this priority and prejudice into question:

‘Humanity’. – We do not regard the animals as moral beings. But do you suppose the animals regard us as moral beings? – An animal which could speak said: ‘Humanity is a prejudice of which we animals at least are free’ (*Daybreak* 333)¹¹.

In section 109 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche himself mentioned the need to “naturalize humans”: “When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to “naturalize” humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature? (*The Gay Science*, 109)¹². One translator of this passage, Walter Kaufmann, notes that it signifies naturalism in contrast with the supernatural, as a kind of emancipatory disenchantment or secularization of human life and its world¹³. Such remarks in favor of naturalization in response to the shadows of God that darken and obscure our minds and existence are not unfamiliar from Nietzsche's works. Yet, it is worthwhile to consider whether we can clarify the sense of this naturalization at work here and whether it constitutes naturalism. Is it, for example, the naturalism as “interpretive holism” that Christoph Cox proposed, or

¹⁰ Nietzsche, KSA 5: 53.

¹¹ “Menschlichkeit’. – Wir halten die Thiere nicht für moralische Wesen. Aber meint ihr denn, dass die Thiere uns für moralische Wesen halten? – Ein Thier, welches reden konnte, sagte: ‘Menschlichkeit ist ein Vorurtheil, an dem wenigstens wir Thiere nicht leiden.’” Nietzsche, KSA 3: 234; also note KSA 3: 510.

¹² “Wann werden wir die Natur ganz entgöttlich haben! Wann werden wir anfangen dürfen, uns Menschen mit der reinen, neu gefundenen, neu erlösten Natur zu vernatürlichen!” Nietzsche, KSA 3: 469; GS, 169.

¹³ W. Kaufmann, GS, 169.

the speculative, methodological, and anti-realistic naturalism promoted by Brian Leiter¹⁴?

While Nietzsche concluded this passage by evoking “newly redeemed nature” (*neu erlösten Natur*)¹⁵, he began it by critiquing two apparently conflicting approaches to nature. Nietzsche warns against thinking that the world is a living being, an efficient machine, or an elegant cyclical movement. These aspects are the exceptions, favored by anthropomorphism, whereas nature is chaos and labyrinth:

The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos-in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms (*The Gay Science*, 109)¹⁶.

The eternal chaos of the natural world follows the necessity of its own determinations without purposes or instincts, and without underlying laws and order¹⁷. The world is in this perspective not a collection of substances or atoms, whether material or spiritual units, nor is it one comprehensive whole. Nietzsche’s strategies of “naturalization” do not lead back to one determinate systematic order of nature, whether this “nature” is conceived as metaphysical, poetic, or scientific.

Accordingly, earlier in poem 55, speaking of the naturalistic painters who demand that their works be “true to nature” (*Treu die Natur*) Nietzsche points out “the infinity of nature’s smallest part” (*Unendlich ist das kleinste Stück der Welt*) and that therefore what they depict is not nature’s truth but their own delight according to their own abilities¹⁸. Even in regard to the sciences, Nietzsche argued that we only capture what allows itself to be captured and natural worlds multiply further than our anthropocentric

¹⁴ Ch. Cox, *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation*, Berkeley 1999, p. 114; B. Leiter and N. Sinhababu, *Nietzsche and Morality*, Oxford 2007, p. 195. Also compare B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, London 2002; B. Leiter, *Nietzsche’s Naturalism Reconsidered*, [in:] K. Gemes and J. Richardson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, Oxford 2009.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 469; GS, 169.

¹⁶ „Der Gesamt-Charakter der Welt ist dagegen in alle Ewigkeit Chaos, nicht im Sinne der fehlenden Notwendigkeit, sondern der fehlenden Ordnung, Gliederung, Form, Schönheit, Weisheit, und wie alle unsere ästhetischen Menschlichkeiten heißen.“ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 469; GS, 169. On Nietzsche’s thinking of chaos, compare Martin Heidegger, GA 44: *Nietzsches metaphysische Grundstellung im abendländischen Denken: Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 101.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 467–468, 552; GS, 167–168, 254.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 365; GS, 65.

perceptual and conceptual horizons can enclose¹⁹. The dynamic infinite in nature's smallest detail does not only then extend beyond the power and insight of the painter; it escapes and eludes the scientist and the naturalistic scientific philosopher.

Given that the awareness of the precariousness, uncertainty, and need to go further and overturn itself is what distinguishes scientific practice from morality, metaphysics, and religion, the scientist falsifies the experimental interpretive character of the sciences, which are a virtue of science as much as of art for Nietzsche, by treating them as fixed or absolute. Through experimentalism, art transforms the nature with which it is continuous, at the same time as Nietzsche warns us to beware of becoming a mere actor in this process²⁰.

To the extent that Nietzsche can be described as committed to scientism or positivism at all, it is of a peculiar sort that undermines their paradigmatic interpretation. Nietzsche's advocacy of science challenges it insofar as he praises science as experimentation through replaceable falsehoods, and frequently critiques its role in modernity. Nietzsche's ostensible naturalism likewise fundamentally problematized the reified image of nature presupposed by conventional naturalisms. Nietzsche utilized reductive naturalistic strategies and yet in a fundamental sense there is no common or definitive nature on which to base or define naturalism as a doctrinal or methodological truth about nature. Nietzsche's naturalizing tendencies do not exhaust his project insofar as it does not only involve appeals to nature but a critique of ideologies of nature, whether they are metaphysical, romantic, or scientific.

To the degree that Nietzsche is more of an epistemic anarchist who adopted a variety of methods, rather than a follower of one definitive method or style of philosophizing, his naturalization of truth and nature eliminates the prospect of naturalism in any conventional sense as a truth about the world or as a method. Naturalism is an argumentative strategy; it is one value and perspective among many in the shifting weaving of perspectives enacted in his writing.

3. Generative Nature: Beyond Constructivism and Naturalism?

Nietzsche explicitly maintained in *The Gay Science* the constructed and fallible character of our conception of nature and life:

¹⁹ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 110.

²⁰ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 596; GS, 303.

We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody could now endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error. (*The Gay Science*, 121).

Conscious life is a fantastic commentary on an unknown even if somehow felt text.²¹ The derivative and illusive character of consciousness and of a subject that believes it has self-knowledge is a well-known theme for Nietzsche. Nietzsche's descriptions of the body as a conflict of drives and forces unknown to our pre-reflective awareness indicates how challenging Nietzsche's materialism is for the idealistic premises of phenomenology and its "anchored subject" of a reflexively self-aware consciousness, "the" body, or being-in-the-world. Genealogical natural history breaks through the illusions of constitutive subjectivity. As origins are fortuitous and impure, there is no return to pure origins in consciousness, will, bodily flesh, or event of being. Such concepts can only be demystified by being referred back to their worldly constitution and natural-historical conditions.

Nietzsche's skeptical critique of ordinary causal reasoning evokes the phenomenological critique of causality. But these criticisms undermine the teleological interpretation of causality, they do not lead him to the suspension of the causal—and hence conditional and contingent – empirical affairs in which each embodied natural-historical agent is intertwined and dispersed. The unity of the phenomenological *ātman* disappears across discontinuous causal moments, and insight into the origin reveals how unoriginal and dependent it is²².

Given the contingent causal conditions of life, Nietzsche calls for a joyful science of experimentation with the changing conditions of life rather than the suspension of empirical factual judgment. This joyful playful science includes Nietzsche's account of time in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Several readers – most notably, Martin Heidegger in his interpretation of Nietzsche as the "last metaphysician" of the West who signifies the culmination rather than the overcoming of metaphysics – interpret Nietzsche's temporality positively or negatively as a reassertion of metaphysics²³. Nietzsche, however,

²¹ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 113.

²² Nietzsche, KSA 3: 52.

²³ For the fuller context of Heidegger's reading of and often troublesome relationship with Nietzsche, see R. Bernasconi, *Heidegger, Nietzsche, National Socialism: The Place of Metaphysics in the Political Debate of the 1930s* and U. Haase, *Heidegger and Nietzsche*, [in:] F. Raffoul and E. S. Nelson, eds., *Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, London 2013, pp. 47–53, 121–128.

contrasts cyclical and linear time in order to suggest a cosmological reaffirmation of a life – namely, one’s own life – in its contingency and multiplicity. The eternal return of the same, as Paul S. Loeb recently shown, is a cosmic thesis that entails an immanent perspectival cyclical temporality rather than reaffirming the external time articulated in the conventional understanding of time found in both science and traditional metaphysics²⁴.

Nietzsche’s exploration of new seas (*nach neuen Meeren*), his condition-oriented experimentalism, has been interpreted as part of his “happy positivism”. Positivism is not the opposite of hermeneutics as it is sometimes claimed to be, since some of its forms—such as that of the early Carnap – emphasize the importance of the construction and interpretation of experience for the sciences. Carnap, who was a reader of Nietzsche in the 1920’s, is not far from Nietzsche’s claim that: “even physics is only a way of interpreting or arranging the world (if I may say so: according to us!) and not a way of explaining the world”²⁵.

Nevertheless, where Nietzsche and logical positivism differ is on questions of value and its neutralization. While promoting science is linked with the general project of enlightened culture and progressive politics in Carnap and Neurath, it is not connected to the particular methods and contents of scientific inquiry. For both, science and nature are without teleology and will as an essence or substance, to the degree that Nietzsche criticizes Spinoza for being still too teleological, and yet for Nietzsche life is inseparable from its valuing and being valued²⁶.

Nietzsche could write in the *Gay Science* that all experience is inherently moral²⁷. All experience including sense perception, Nietzsche claimed, is already moral evaluative²⁸. This holds for theory as well. This entails that interpretation is not a neutral pragmatics of the best available arguments, theories, and truths, as such pragmatics already presupposes an answer to the question of what is valued, how much it is valued, and what is not.

In spite of Nietzsche’s ardent polemics against ethics and morality, Nietzsche is a deeply ethical thinker in interpreting human existence through the lenses of moral questions if not traditional moral answers. These lenses are focused not only on what supposedly deviates from nature but on what appeals to nature as if nature provided an absolute essence, norm, or standard.

²⁴ Compare P. S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, Cambridge 2010.

²⁵ „dass Physik auch nur eine Welt-Auslegung und –Zurechtlegung (nach uns! mit Verlaub gesagt) und nicht eine Welt- Erklärung ist.” Nietzsche, KSA 5: 28; BGE, §14.

²⁶ Nietzsche, KSA 5; BGE, 95, 152–153.

²⁷ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 114; GS, 174.

²⁸ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 114; GS, 174.

4. Living according to Nature?

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, §9, Nietzsche's examines the Hellenistic-Roman idea of "living according to nature," asking "Do you love nature? You want to live 'according to nature'? O you noble Stoics, what fraudulent words!" Both the Stoics and Epicureans appealed to this idea and yet ended up with a different conception of nature and what living according to it might mean. Nietzsche noted again that nature is reduced to what one desires it to be, as a Stoic or Epicurean²⁹.

The idea of living according to nature is an idealization of nature that involves forgetting that nature and living naturally are constructions, projections, and interpretations. Nietzsche commented that there is in fact nothing less natural than the nature of such philosophers, who ascetically, moralistically, and later romantically read their own conditions and feeling of life into nature. Humans do not live according to nature, as he remarked in *Dawn*, they imagine themselves into it³⁰. Such an imperative remains an empty tautology, as he argued in *Beyond Good and Evil*, §9, unless one gives nature and life a value;

And supposing your imperative 'live according to nature' meant at bottom as much as 'live according to life' – how can you not do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be³¹?

Nietzsche does not only assess God, the True, and the Good as otherworldly projections of this-worldly beings. He simultaneously rejected appeals to immanent worldly phenomena made into ideals, such as nature in the Stoics, natural law theory, Rousseau, and Wagner, and also in the naturalistic and positivistic philosophies of his times that are still beholden to the compulsion of metaphysical need³².

There are no facts only interpretations, Nietzsche remarked, and nature has been revealed as another human construct and as – to use a non-Nietzschean word – ideological. This cannot be the last word, however, since – as seen earlier – Nietzsche insisted that infinite chaotic nature extends beyond human thought and activity and has impulses that resist and upset the projects and constructs of conventional human anthropomorphism.

²⁹ Nietzsche, KSA 5:22; BGE, §9.

³⁰ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 29; D, 17.

³¹ „Und gesetzt, euer Imperativ ‚gemäss der Natur leben‘ bedeute im Grunde soviel als ‚gemäss dem Leben leben‘ – wie könntet ihr's denn nicht? Wozu ein Princip aus dem machen, was ihr selbst seid und sein müsst?“ Nietzsche, KSA5: 22; BGE, §9.

³² Nietzsche, KSA 3: 581; GS, 288.

5. Natural Histories

As Nietzsche repeatedly argued, including in his most positivistic period, there is no independent nature in itself that could free it or us from our interpretations, interests, and evaluations of value³³. Our “nature” is to artfully pick and choose, value and devalue, and rank and transformatively order and reorder, even as “nature” is in itself neither good nor evil for Nietzsche³⁴. Nevertheless, this valuing does not occur out of free will or in the transparency of consciousness that Nietzsche deconstructed as fictional entities³⁵. Interpretation is neither arbitrary nor infinite; it is shadowed by an ape, and physiologically and social-historically circumscribed and conditioned.

Consequently, all our attitudes about nature are rooted in human instincts and drives that have codified and rearranged previous experiences and feelings of natural phenomena. Nietzsche described in *Dawn* how our contemporary feelings of natural beauty and joy and wonder in nature are explicable only as interconnected with and rooted in a history of fear³⁶. Knowledge and feelings of nature are not spontaneous affects; they are historical formations repeatedly shaped and reshaped by biological and environmental circumstances. They are the stratified, often stagnated, yet alterable remnants of previous reactions and responses to natural phenomena of which present action and contemplation are neither free nor disinterested³⁷.

Although humans act out of specific feelings of nature and life, of a specific configuration of forces that can be called the will to power, this explanation of human activity is not an endorsement of its truth or value insofar as it is constitutively and necessarily unreliable³⁸.

As remnants of the history of the species and of lineages, passions, instincts, and drives are the impure mixture of nature and history, they can therefore only be addressed as and through “natural history” (*Naturgeschichte*), which is a phrase Nietzsche periodically uses, especially in his middle works³⁹. The conceptions of *Naturgeschichte* in both its Marxist and Nietzschean varieties critically oppose ideologies that essentialize and reify nature and materiality or society and mind. Natural history does not only examine nature or physics and culture or society as isolated realities, but precisely how nature is inevitably socialized and individuated in the life of

³³ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 51, 190.

³⁴ Nietzsche, KSA 3: respectively, 92 and 29–30, 171.

³⁵ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 119.

³⁶ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 134.

³⁷ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 134.

³⁸ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 136.

³⁹ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 100, 378.

groups and individuals and how social-cultural life is constituted in relation to its bodily, environmental, and material life. This is the locus where what Nietzsche earlier called “critical history” and later “genealogy” needs to occur⁴⁰. It addresses humanity’s reptilian morals as much as its highest ideals through which humanity likes to imagine itself.

Nietzsche critiqued purely critical history in the *Untimely Meditations* and nonetheless developed radical strategies and models of critique that negate in order to affirm⁴¹. This importantly included the critique of the slanderers of nature for the sake of the affirmation of nature – not as essence or ideal but as the conditional circumstances and conditions of life⁴². It is this sense of nature in contrast with anti-nature that Nietzsche can speak critically of the lack of style and “Jesuitism” of naturalism, but in other passages more positively of “naturalism”:

I formulate a principle. All naturalism in morality, that is all healthy morality, is dominated by an instinct of life – some commandment of life is fulfilled through a certain canon of ‘shall’ and ‘shall not’, some hindrance and hostile element on life’s road is thereby removed. Anti-natural morality, that is virtually every morality that has hitherto been taught, revered and preached, turns on the contrary precisely against the instincts of life (*Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” Parts 3–4).

6. Nature and Interpretive Life

Beginning with his turn to natural history, Nietzsche examined nature social-historically and social-historical phenomena in relation to their bodily and environmental conditions and circumstances. Genealogy not only traces the lineages of morality and religion, it follows the social-historical disciplining and shaping, interpretation and transformation, of seemingly natural passions, instincts, drives, and desires.

On the basis of the critical model of natural history, Nietzsche can diagnose appeals to nature and the natural as ideological products rather than consider them as brute primary facts or givens. Nietzsche’s praise of naturalness and call to return to the senses, the earth, and the body is not

⁴⁰ On the critical potential of *Naturgeschichte* and the relation between Nietzsche’s earlier critique of “critical history” and his later conception of genealogy, see Nelson, *Priestly Power and Damaged Life in Nietzsche and Adorno*, *op.cit.*, pp. 349–356.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 545; GS, 246.

⁴² Nietzsche, KSA 3: 534–535; GS, 236.

an appeal to these as fixed ahistorical absolutes. They are part of developing, cultivating, and individuating oneself under and in response to the natural and historical conditions of life. Nietzsche is accordingly not only concerned with bare life, such as survival, but with its affirmation, intensification, and cultivation.

Living is a cultivating and artistic activity; it is *Bildung* and experimentation in relation to itself, such that nature realizes itself in a life in and as art. Speaking of gardening in section 290 of the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that nature is in this sense already “stylized nature,” whether it is stylized as conquered, tamed, and useful nature or as an imagined wild and free nature⁴³.

Furthermore, Nietzsche advocated extending and furthering natural scientific inquiry and employed scientific naturalistic strategies of explanation and demystification. Yet Nietzsche also warns that “naturalization” is reification:

One should not wrongly reify ‘cause’ and ‘effect,’ as the natural scientists do (and whoever, like them, now ‘naturalizes’ in his thinking), according to the prevailing mechanical doltishness which makes the cause press and push until it ‘effects’ its end (*The Gay Science*)⁴⁴.

Nietzsche’s critique of naturalism, undertaken for the sake of nature and life and which is not limited to the mechanistic form of naturalism, is part of this project of disenchantment, which includes the demystification or dereification of science, positivism, and scientific naturalism. These do not offer absolute certainties or ideal foundations for either knowledge or life.

If naturalism is considered only to be a methodological or heuristic stance, as in recent versions of the naturalistic reading of Nietzsche, this is to admit its interpretive character. All naturalisms are interpretations, more or less useful fictions, and not merely “natural”⁴⁵. The impossibility of an exclusive naturalistic stance is suggested by Nietzsche’s analysis of the language of physics as intrinsically interpretative. Even the language of physics, Nietzsche argued, is philology; and natural laws are intrinsically interpretations of nature instead of nature in itself or as such⁴⁶. Nietzsche radicalizes this point by pointing out how the purported “conformity

⁴³ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 530–531.

⁴⁴ “Man soll nicht ‘Ursache’ und ‘Wirkung’ fehlerhaft verdinglichen, wie es die Naturforscher tun (und wer gleich ihnen heute im Denken naturalisiert –) gemäß der herrschenden mechanistischen Tölpelei [...]” Nietzsche, KSA 3: 35.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 36.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 37.

of nature to law” is not only interpretation but bad philology and naïve interpretation⁴⁷.

Naturalism is in this sense distant from the multi-perspectival generative happening of nature that it obscures through its ideological image of nature. It is not natural insofar as naturalism is another perspectival construct, and from the beginning an unacknowledged hermeneutics of nature⁴⁸.

7. Nature as Art

The focus of this paper on the interpretative and artistic understanding of nature unfolded in Nietzsche’s writings corrects a number of one-sided interpretations. Nietzsche emerges in this account as a hermeneutical and methodological pluralist who prioritizes the self-interpretation of life in its natural and social contexts and conditions. There is no one conception, experience, or worldview of nature that would exclude other alternative conceptions and experiences of nature in Nietzsche’s philosophy. Nor can naturalism as one heuristic and conditional method or strategy exclude other methods or strategies. The mixing and play of myriad strategies and perspectives characteristic of Nietzsche’s writings reveal the radical plurality and transformative generativity of nature throughout his reflections concerning science and art. This means that “nature” is continuous with interpretation and art, which are its fulfillment.

The neglect of the poetic and artistic strategies of Nietzsche’s writing in naturalistic readings reflects an impoverishment of Nietzsche’s style of philosophizing. Nor is this richness rediscovered by describing Nietzsche as a speculative naturalist. Nietzsche is not simply engaged in the scientific and speculative description of natural phenomena from an external or objectivating third-person point of view. This is, as we have seen, the latent metaphysics of contemporary scientism in Nietzsche’s analysis. His work differs from such scientism and its impersonal ascetic ideal by engaging in the basically hermeneutical self-reflection, self-elucidation, and self-formation of a life. This is indeed the conditional, contingent, and yet still undeniably personal life that Nietzsche describes science as serving. This is why a text such as *Ecce Homo* is not a set of accidental afterthoughts but a preeminently philosophical work.

Nietzsche’s “personalism,” however, at best a provisional one in which I potentially live and cultivate my life as a work of art without there being an underlying nature, essence, or substance of that life. That is, it is a heuristic or strategic individualism without a substantial self or constitutive subject.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, KSA 5: BGE, §22.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, KSA 3: 626–627.

Nietzsche's anti-impersonalism is based in his interpretation of natural drives as inherently configured, ranked, and interpreted in relation to the personality of the individual. This is why his reductive physiological explanations of the philosophers in reality reveal what is personal and unique about "who" they are. Nietzsche accordingly noted against the impersonal prejudice of the philosophers:

In contrast, there is absolutely nothing impersonal about the philosopher; and in particular his morals bear decided and decisive witness to who he is – which means, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand with respect to each other (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §6)⁴⁹.

My life is constituted in and entangled in the impersonal biological and social-historical forces of life and all the challenges to identity and self-identity that are revealed through Nietzsche's genealogical analysis of the formation of the self.

Still, the task of poetically and artistically living a life in the face of the impersonal forces of one's life is a more fundamental question in Nietzsche's thinking from the *Birth of Tragedy* to *Ecce Homo* than the commitment to a scientific conception of nature for its own sake. It is in this context of "becoming who one is" that Nietzsche's conception of nature is to be addressed.

8. Conclusion


Nature is depicted as indifference, labyrinth, and chaos by Nietzsche. The dancing star is born out of this chaos. Unlike doctrinal naturalisms that attempt to reduce Nietzsche's multifaceted and radical thinking to a method or program, "nature" is not a univocal or unequivocal concept in Nietzsche's writings. The "natural" presupposes interpretation to be understood. Our conceptions of "nature" are in need of a wider more extended context of art, experiment, formation, and interpretation, i.e., of individuation, in a life. This interpretation of Nietzsche's conceptualization of nature has several significant implications:

(1) On the one hand, naturalism would be anti- or un-natural if it involved a denial of its artistic and hermeneutical character insofar as life is more than bare or brute nature; that is, living is life affirming, creating, forming, and interpreting itself. Naturalism is as a result only possible in a Nietzschean context as an interpretive art or as hermeneutics.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, KSA 5: 19–20; BGE, §6.

(2) On the other hand, naturalism undermines itself insofar as it brackets the equally natural-historical conditions of human existence and knowledge, forgets the interpretive and perceptual perspectival character of life and knowledge, or abandons the perspectivity, multiplicity, and agonistic conflict of the interdependent forces of life. The dynamic and generative configuration of necessity and meaning in a life indicates the inseparability of the biological and the historical in the interpretive formation of the life of individuals.

The analysis of the mediated and entangled nexus of nature and history in Nietzsche's works can be better clarified through his portrayal of the feeling of life and its intensification, attenuation, and transformation in relation to the forces and conditions of life, which are not simply naturalistic insofar as they involve socialization and individuation, and are interpretive and artistic in the interpretive context of a singular nexus of life:

Fundamentally, all our actions are altogether incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual; there is no doubt of that. But as soon as we translate them into consciousness they no longer seem to be
(*The Gay Science*, 299–300).⁵⁰ 

ERIC S. NELSON – profesor na Uniwersytecie w Massachusetts, Lowell (USA). Główne obszary zainteresowań: europejska filozofia XIX i XX wieku, porównawcze badania filozofii i religii wschodu, etyka i filozofia społeczno-polityczna, hermeneutyka, filozofia przyrody. Opublikował ponad pięćdziesiąt prac naukowych poświęconych filozofii chińskiej, niemieckiej i żydowskiej. Jest współredaktorem książek: *Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); *Rethinking Facticity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008); *Between Levinas and Heidegger* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014); *Anthropologie und Geschichte. Studien zu Wilhelm Dilthey aus Anlass seines 100. Todestages* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013); *Addressing Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

ERIC S. NELSON – Associate Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell (USA). Main areas of interest: 19th and 20th-Century European Philosophy, Eastern and Comparative Philosophy and Religion, Ethics and Social-Political Philosophy, hermeneutics and the philosophy of nature. He has published over fifty articles and book chapters on Chinese, German, and Jewish philosophy. He is the co-editor of the books: *Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); *Rethinking Facticity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008); *Between Levinas and Heidegger* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014); *Anthropologie und Geschichte. Studien zu Wilhelm Dilthey aus Anlass seines 100. Todestages* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013); *Addressing Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ “Unsre Handlungen sind im Grunde allesamt auf eine unvergleichliche Weise persönlich, einzig, unbegrenzt-individuell, es ist kein Zweifel; aber sobald wir sie in's Bewusstsein übersetzen, scheinen sie es nicht mehr.” Nietzsche, KSA 3: 592–593; GS, 299–300.

Copyright of Archive of the History of Philosophy & Social Thought / Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej is the property of IFiS PAN Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.